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# SOCIAL MEDIA WARFARE AND KENYA'S CONFLICT WITH AL SHABAAB IN SOMALIA: A RIGHT TO KNOW?

THOMAS MOLONY\*

## ABSTRACT

This article explores Kenyan citizens' right to know details about sensitive security-related information in the context of a new era of social media warfare. It considers the public communications response to Al Shabaab's January 2016 attack on Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) personnel in El Adde, Somalia, and then to a similar attack in Kulbiyow a year later. Drawing on Twitter posts, an official account of Kenya's military activities in Somalia, and – unusually for the study of social media – on 'offline' methods of qualitative data collection, it asks why the KDF did not provide real-time updates about the El Adde attack, but did provide information about the assault on Kulbiyow? Three plausible explanations for the KDF's differing response are considered. First, at the time of El Adde, the KDF was inexperienced in terms of social media communication. Second, El Adde taught the KDF that in order not to lose the all-important public opinion, it had to match its enemy and also disseminate credible information. Finally, the strengthening voice of Kenyan citizens and the potential for further reputational damage pushed the KDF from a 'need-to-know' frame of mind in terms of its sharing of information, to more of a 'right-to-know' mentality.

ON 15 JANUARY 2016, ISLAMIST MILITANTS LAUNCHED a pre-dawn attack on an African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forward operating base garrisoned by Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) troops at El Adde, Gedo region, Somalia. *Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujaahidiin* (commonly known as Al Shabaab) claimed that 'Mujahideen fighters from the "Commander Saleh An-Nabhani Battalion" stormed the Kenyan base in El-Adde ... killing more than 100 Kenyan invaders, seizing their weapons and military vehicles and even capturing Kenyan soldiers alive'.<sup>1</sup> The Government of Kenya has not given a precise death toll. The UN Monitoring Group on Somalia believes that some 150 KDF personnel were killed during the attack, making it the largest military defeat in Kenyan history.<sup>2</sup> As the story broke, the concern on Twitter was initially about the main details of the attack, especially the number of casualties. KDF went silent, sparking a more far-reaching debate – much of it on social media – about the public's access to information during wartime. Almost exactly a year after El Adde, Al Shabaab launched a very similar attack on KDF troops based in Kulbiyow, Lower

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<sup>1</sup> Harakat Al Shabaab Al Mujaahidiin statement, 'In pictures: 100 Kenyan invaders massacred', 20 January 2016, *Internet Archive*, <<https://archive.org/stream/InPictures100KenyanInvadersMassacred/In Pictures - 100 Kenyan Invaders Massacred - page/n0/mode/1up>> (25 July 2016). (Graphic images.)

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, 'Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea pursuant to Security Council resolution 2244' (New York, October 2016), p. 12.

Juba region. In stark contrast to their communications response to El Adde, this time the KDF acted quickly on social media with operational updates offering their version of events and some information on casualties.

The contrast in the communications responses raises the question that drives this article: why did the KDF not provide real-time updates about the El Adde attack, but did provide information about the Kulbiyow attack one year later? The findings of a series of focus groups and interviews and observation of social media use offers data on the public mood at the time. This, along with an official account of Kenya's military activities in Somalia, helps provide three plausible explanations for the KDF's differing response. First, at the time of El Adde, the KDF was inexperienced in terms of social media communication, having never really been tested in an environment where it was operational lead and the enemy was giving real-time updates. Second, El Adde taught the KDF that in order not to lose the all-important public opinion, it had to match its enemy and also disseminate credible information to the public. Finally, the strengthening voice of Kenyan citizens – amplified by social media – and the potential for further reputational damage pushed the KDF from a 'need-to-know' frame of mind in terms of its sharing of information, to more of a 'right-to-know' mentality.

This article serves to answer the call for country-specific cases to understand ways in which social media, traditional media, and political culture interact.<sup>3</sup> Many of the studies and commentaries that address this topic tend to consider the influence of social media and traditional media on elections, especially in the United States and other wealthy Western nations.<sup>4</sup> This article engages more closely with an emerging literature trying to comprehend the dynamics of what Thomas Nissen calls 'social media warfare': a war over information online that is drawing in citizens, states and their militaries in equal measure.<sup>5</sup> It also contributes to literature covering responses to Kenya's operations in Somalia, Kenyan security forces' use of social media in their ongoing conflict with Al Shabaab, and the resilience of the East African terrorist group, especially through its use of social media.<sup>6</sup> In so doing, the article

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Howard and Malcolm Parks, 'Social media and political change: Capacity, constraint, and consequence', *Journal of Communication* 62 (2012), pp. 359–62, p. 361.

<sup>4</sup> Victoria Farrar-Myers and Justin Vaughn (eds), *Controlling the message: New media in American political campaigns* (New York University Press, New York, 2015); Andrew Guess, Brendan Nyhan and Jason Reifler, 'Selective exposure to misinformation: Evidence from the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign', 9 January 2018 <<https://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/fake-news-2016.pdf>> (18 February 2018); Denis Muller, 'How the relationship between social media and traditional media has shaped this election', 29 June 2016, *The Conversation*, <<https://theconversation.com/how-the-relationship-between-social-media-and-traditional-media-has-shaped-this-election-61585>> (26 February 2018).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Nissen, '#TheWeaponizationOfSocialMedia' (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2015). Also Murtaza Hussain, 'The new information warfare', 25 November 2017, *The Intercept*, <<https://theintercept.com/2017/11/25/information-warfare-social-media-book-review-gaza/>> (30 November 2017); David Patrikarakos, *War in 140 characters: How social media is reshaping conflict in the twenty-first century* (Basic Books, New York, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> David Anderson and Jacob McKnight, 'Kenya at war: Al-Shabaab and its enemies in Eastern Africa', *African Affairs* 114, 454 (2014), pp. 1-27; Jeremy Lind, Patrick Mutahi and Marjoke Oosterom, "'Killing a mosquito with a hammer": Al-Shabaab violence and state security responses in Kenya', *Peacebuilding* 5, 2 (2017), pp. 1-18; Paul Williams, 'The battle at El Adde: The Kenya Defence Forces, al-Shabaab, and unanswered questions' (International Peace Institute, New York, 2016); Christopher Anzalone, 'The resilience of Al-Shabaab', *CTC Sentinel* 9, 4 (April 2016), pp. 13-20; David Anderson and Jacob McKnight, 'Understanding al-Shabaab: Clan,

offers a glimpse into the domestic political elements of a foreign war played out on Twitter and other internet-based platforms: a location that George Ogola and Mike Owuor call Kenya's 'third space' – a site of information sharing 'neither "owned" by the state nor mainstream media but potentially powerful enough to be contested'.<sup>7</sup> Taking inspiration from the quiet interaction of politics, power and technology that Iginio Gagliardone describes in his study of ICT in Ethiopia, this article regards social media platforms such as Twitter as rowdy sites of contestation where discussions of security-related matters affecting Kenyans are played out in the open – often with a strong political undercurrent – by ordinary citizens and powerful key influencers who are both seen and unseen.<sup>8</sup> While it would be overstating the case to see these dialogues as 'staged events', as Nicole Stremlau argues of Somali radio call-in programmes where citizens discuss accountability and democratic participation, the Twitter battles can be understood, much like the call-in shows, as being shaped by power, political interests and economic agendas.<sup>9</sup>

While much research has been undertaken on the role of social media during the Arab Spring in North Africa and in responding to *ebola* in West Africa, there have been few studies into the use of social media during times of insecurity or uncertainty in East Africa.<sup>10</sup> Two recent contributions are David Mair's analysis of Al Shabaab's tweets during the Westgate assault of 2013 in Nairobi, and research conducted by Tomer Simon and his team on tweets sent by individuals and emergency responders in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on Kenyan soil.<sup>11</sup> This is the first study of social media concerning Kenyan security personnel on foreign soil, where engagement with the public was guided by strict communications protocols. This study also differs from those of the domestic Kenyan setting in that its data is not tied to online social media content. In the main, studies of social media often favour collecting and analysing purely online content usually using quantitative analysis and do not incorporate the traditional 'offline' methods of qualitative data collection. Online approaches certainly have their merits. For example, studies of social media in relation to security turn to the power of meta-data in

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Islam and insurgency in Kenya', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9, 3, (2015), pp. 536-57; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher and James Sheehan, 'Lights, camera, *jihad*: Al-Shabaab's western media strategy' (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, London, 2012); Rachel Sullivan, 'Live-tweeting terror: A rhetorical analysis of @HSMPress\_ Twitter updates during the 2013 Nairobi hostage crisis', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7, 3 (2014), pp. 422-33.

<sup>7</sup> George Ogola and Mike Owuor, 'Citizen journalism in Kenya as a contested "third space"', in Bruce Mutsaers (ed.), *Participatory politics and citizen journalism in a networked Africa: A connected continent* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016), pp. 229-243.

<sup>8</sup> Iginio Gagliardone, *The politics of technology in Africa: Communication, development, and nation-building in Ethiopia* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016); Ogola, 'Citizen journalism', p. 241-242.

<sup>9</sup> Nicole Stremlau, Emanuele Fantini and Iginio Gagliardone, 'Patronage, politics and performance: Radio call-in programmes and the myth of accountability', *Third World Quarterly* 36, 8 (2015), pp. 1510-26, p. 1511.

<sup>10</sup> For example, Christopher Wilson and Alexandra Dunn, 'Digital media in the Egyptian revolution: Descriptive analysis from the Tahrir data sets', *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011), pp. 1248-72; Isaac Fung, Carmen Hope, Kathryn Finch, et al, 'Ebola virus disease and social media: A systematic review', *American Journal of Infection Control* 44, 12 (2016), pp. 1660-71. On the Horn, see Peter Chonka, 'New media, performative violence, and state reconstruction in Mogadishu', *African Affairs* 117, 468 (2018), pp. 392-414.

<sup>11</sup> David Mair, '#Westgate: A case study: How al-Shabaab used Twitter during an on-going attack', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, 1 (2016), pp. 24-43; Tomer Simon, Avishay Goldberg, Limor Aharonson-Daniel, et al, 'Twitter in the cross fire: The use of social media in the Westgate Mall terror attack in Kenya', *PLoS ONE* 9, 8 (2014), pp. 1-11.

using natural language processing and data mining techniques to extract situation awareness information from Twitter messages generated during various disasters and crises.<sup>12</sup> One issue is that the focus is often on Twitter and other open-source social networks. This can come at the expense of closed-system networks such as instant messaging mobile applications Signal, Telegram and WhatsApp, which are popular in part because of their use of end-to-end encryption that makes access to content data more difficult. Other studies, including those on Westgate mentioned above, conduct useful content analysis of data sets.<sup>13</sup> These are beneficial in that they can offer fine-grained detail in the *online* interplay and interactions between groups during and after a security incident.<sup>14</sup> They are less suited to capture the *offline* context of individual actors, including those who observe online discussions and other activity but may not comment or otherwise reveal an engagement with the discussion. The voluminous and immensely rich social media data runs the risk of blinkering researchers from many of the benefits that qualitative methods of data collection can offer, such as the findings of interviews, focus groups or other forms of co-present interaction with those who generate the very tweets, Facebook posts and other data that many studies of social media often examine. As Nic Cheeseman, Carl Death and Lindsay Whitfield have put it in a recent introduction to the Research Notes series for this journal, analysis of such new sources of information accessed by researchers ‘sitting at a desk thousands of miles away from the country that they are writing on... [can] lead to research that oversimplifies the reality on the ground’.<sup>15</sup>

Conversations trending on Twitter and Facebook identified Al Shabaab’s attack on El Adde as a topic of interest to Kenyans on social media at the time. The online demand for further information and the subsequent silence from official sources make understanding the KDF’s lack of communication a topic of interest in itself. When neither the KDF nor the National Counter Terrorism Centre (NCTC) responded to invitations to discuss their social media strategy, the research focus for this article remained on offline methods of data collection, but shifted to understanding the audience’s appetite for information about El Adde. If after the attack social media users did not feel that they had a right to know details, then the KDF was perhaps justified in not providing any. The Kenya-based research sought to understand the various nuances in calls for details about the attack, with an interest in comparing the heated clamour online with how the conversation flowed among co-present users of social media. As discussed later, it often resulted in contrasting opinions among the focus groups, with one side venturing reasons why the KDF should not provide what some deemed to be sensitive information, and the other side demanding citizens’ right to know details about the attack. In all cases it led to further speculation over the KDF’s reasons for its silence.

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<sup>12</sup> Jie Yin, Andrew Lampert, Mark Cameron, et al, 'Using social media to enhance emergency situation awareness', *IEEE Intelligent Systems* 27, 6 (2012), pp. 52-59.

<sup>13</sup> Mair, '#Westgate'; Simon, 'Twitter in the cross fire'.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Innes, Colin Roberts, Alun Preece, et al, 'Ten “Rs” of social reaction: Using social media to analyse the “post-event” impacts of the murder of Lee Rigby', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2016), Epub, DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2016.1180289, pp. 1-21.

<sup>15</sup> Nic Cheeseman, Carl Death and Lindsay Whitfield, 'Notes on researching Africa', *African Affairs* (2017), Epub, DOI: 10.1093/afraf/adx005, pp. 1-5, p. 5.

The first phase of fieldwork for this study took place in Kenya during February and March 2016, little more than a month after the El Adde attack. Eleven focus group discussions, in total comprising 71 informants (30 female and 41 male), were conducted in Nairobi and Mombasa, where social media use is most concentrated.<sup>16</sup> Research assistants helped with recruiting participants who took part in discussions based on their best fit into one of the following categories: university students, non-university youth, non-university adults, and those in professional occupations. All in these groups describe themselves as users, to varying degrees of frequency, of social media, especially Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. In excess of 40 relevant interviews took place in Kenya at different points in 2016 and 2017 with bloggers, and individuals working in journalism, social and/or political research, and the security sector. Interviews were conducted in English. Focus groups were conducted in English, Swahili, or a mixture of both languages.

The article begins with background on the KDF's presence in Somalia. It introduces the concept of the right to know information about the state's activities in the context of a new era of social media warfare. The communication vacuum of El Adde is then analyzed and draws on tweets to give a flavour of the Twitter conversations at the time. This is followed by a shorter discussion on the KDF's response to Kulbiyow, characterized by more regular operational updates. The article then turns to accounting for the public's response and what it suggests for KDF's increased openness on social media. The conclusion reflects on growing political influences on social media in Kenya, and what this means for democracy and accountability.

### *The KDF in Somalia, social media warfare and the right to know*

Al Shabaab was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States Government in 2008 and by the United Kingdom in 2010.<sup>17</sup> For more than a decade Al Shabaab has undertaken a violent insurgency in southern and central Somalia in an attempt to oust UN-backed Somali Federal Government (SFG) and African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) peacekeepers mandated to provide security and reduce the threat posed by the organization. AMISOM self-identifies as a 'Peace Support Mission', although it holds more of the attributes of a counter-insurgency operation than a peacekeeping or peace-enforcement mission.<sup>18</sup> Al Shabaab leaders aim to prevent AMISOM and the SFG from stabilizing the country, thus enabling its insurgents to one day claim territorial control of Somalia.<sup>19</sup> In October 2011 the Republic of Kenya invoked UN Charter Article 51, legalizing the use of force against a

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<sup>16</sup> Noel Miller, 'The tyranny of numbers on social media during Kenya's 2017 elections', *Africa at LSE blog*, 4 September 2017, <<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse/2017/09/04/the-tyranny-of-numbers-on-social-media-during-kenyas-2017-elections/>> (1 December 2017).

<sup>17</sup> US Department of State, 'Designation of al-Shabaab as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist' (Public Notice 6137 Report, Federal Register 73/53, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Washington, D.C., 26 February 2008); UK Home Office, 'Proscribed terrorist organisations' (HMSO, London, 2016), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> AMISOM, 'AMISOM Mandate', 2013, <<http://amisom-au.org/amisom-mandate/>> (24 September 2016); Noel Anderson, 'Why victories in battle have not yet finished the war against al-Shabaab', *Survival: Global politics and strategy* 58, 4 (2016), pp. 51-62, pp. 52-3.

<sup>19</sup> Anzalone, 'The resilience of Al-Shabaab', p. 14.



Member of the United Nations. Two days later – and for motivations that have been disputed – KDF troops crossed the border with Somalia under ‘Operation Linda Nchi’ (‘Protect the Nation’), a combined air and ground offensive against Al Shabaab.<sup>20</sup> The KDF joined AMISOM in February 2012, principally to gain international legitimacy by being part of a multinational force and to ease the Government of Kenya’s financial burden.<sup>21</sup> KDF operations in Somalia are ongoing.

In planning for Operation Linda Nchi, the KDF was well aware of the need to manage its image in the eyes of the Kenyan taxpayer: ‘public perception on military undertakings is critical and must be sought and maintained throughout the duration of the operation’, reads the official account, adding that the KDF ‘realised that people had the right to know and that journalists had a right to tell’.<sup>22</sup> The need for openness in the flow of information from the military to the public was also pressed by General Julius Waweru Karangi, then Chief of the Defence Forces, in his assertion that Kenyans have the right to audit and interrogate the KDF’s engagement.<sup>23</sup> In essence, the KDF position as expressed in its own account of the operation is that the support of Kenyan taxpayers is essential to the military’s success, and so the public has a right to know details about their activities. The counter to this view, and for operational reasons one that militaries have traditionally preferred, is that information should only be disseminated on a need-to-know basis: that is to say, information about military activities is sensitive and access to it should be limited to those with a business need.<sup>24</sup> This was formerly the position of the KDF, which admits that its ‘military operations have been cloaked with the ubiquitous blanket of state security’ and never subject to scrutiny.<sup>25</sup> Herein lies the inherent contradiction of the use of social media in the military setting. An army is understood as a closed and secretive organization that communicates in a formal manner, while social media tends to encourage more open, informal, and emotional communication.<sup>26</sup>

Spurred on by Al Shabaab’s use of information and communication technology to connect with the public, Kenyan security agencies quickly realised that in the need-to-know versus right-to-know debate ‘social media is a game-changer’.<sup>27</sup> The increasingly important role of social media warfare is acknowledged in the official account of Kenya’s military experience

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<sup>20</sup> Gorm Olsen, ‘The October 2011 Kenyan invasion of Somalia: Fighting al-Shabaab or defending institutional interests?’ *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 36, 1 (2018), pp. 39-53.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Defence (MoD), ‘The Chief of Defence Forces press statement on Elade: Update’, 19 January 2016, <<http://www.mod.go.ke/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/CDF-press-conference-Elade-21-Jan.pdf>> (27 July 2016), p. 1; Paul Williams, ‘Joining AMISOM: Why six African states contributed troops to the African Union Mission in Somalia’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 12, 1 (2018), pp. 172-92, pp. 180-81.

<sup>22</sup> Pius Migue, Oscar Oluoch, Paul Njuguna, et al, *Operation Linda Nchi: Kenya's military experience in Somalia* (MoD, Nairobi, 2014), p. 74, p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Migue, *Operation*, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> This follows the UK Cabinet Office’s definition of need-to-know, outlined in ‘Government security classifications April 2014’ (HMSO, London, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>25</sup> Migue, *Operation*, p. 151-152.

<sup>26</sup> Rebecca Stein, ‘StateTube: Anthropological reflections on social media and the Israeli state’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 85, 3 (2012), pp. 893-916, pp. 899-900, paraphrased in Eva-Karin Olsson, Edward Deverell, Charlotte Wagnsson, et al, ‘EU armed forces and social media: Convergence or divergence?’, *Defence Studies* 16, 2 (2016), pp. 97-117, pp. 97-98, who summarize the debate about social media use in military settings.

<sup>27</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source A.

in Somalia, which was ‘marked by an aggressive social media campaign by KDF and Al Shabaab to the general population’.<sup>28</sup> At the onset of the operation, so continues the official account, ‘KDF recognized that social media had the ability to communicate with large audiences’.<sup>29</sup> The sheer size of the Kenyan audience that both the KDF and Al Shabaab seek to influence cannot be overemphasized: social media use among adult internet users or reported smartphone owners in Kenya is at 82 percent, well above China (63 percent), India (62), the United Kingdom (66) and the United States (71), and in Africa below only Nigeria (85 percent).<sup>30</sup> One popular arena is Facebook which, as of September 2017, had 7.1 million monthly users in Kenya.<sup>31</sup> WhatsApp, which allows for communication at the person-to-person level or in groups of individual users, is estimated to have 12 million users in Kenya.<sup>32</sup> For airing grievances in the public arena however, Twitter is currently the platform of choice for many Kenyans, and is said to operate as the country’s virtual ‘town square’ in Kenya’s ‘third space’ that is social media.<sup>33</sup> Kenya comes third in a ranking of sub-Saharan African countries whose citizens tweeted most in 2016, the year of the El Adde attack, with 76 million geolocated tweets.<sup>34</sup> According to Nendo, a digital research company, in 2016 there were 2.2 million monthly active Kenyans on Twitter, close to half of whom used Twitter daily.<sup>35</sup>

### *Online skirmishes with the ‘Twitter terrorists’*

While KDF’s Twitter account dates from late 2012, Al Shabaab have disseminated their message using video, websites and online discussion forums for closer to a decade.<sup>36</sup> The organization’s multiple Twitter accounts were operational in 2009, but particularly active in late 2011 when their media operatives engaged in public sparring on social media with Major Emmanuel Chirchir, then the official spokesman for the KDF.<sup>37</sup> The KDF Twitter account was long regarded as a trusted source on security issues relating to Somalia, and Major Chirchir was hugely popular among journalists and the public for his updates on Operation Linda

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<sup>28</sup> Migue, *Operation*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> Pew Research Centre, ‘Smartphone ownership and internet usage continues to climb in emerging economies’, 22 February 2016, <<http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/02/22/smartphone-ownership-and-internet-usage-continues-to-climb-in-emerging-economies/>> (26 July 2016), p. 21.

<sup>31</sup> Bloggers Association of Kenya, ‘State of the Internet in Kenya 2017 Report’ (Bloggers Association of Kenya, Nairobi, 2018), p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Mark Kaigwa and Yu-Shan Wu, ‘#MadeInAfrica: How China-Africa relations take on new meaning thanks to digital communication’, in Aleksandra Gadzala (ed.), *Africa and China: How Africans and their governments are shaping relations with China* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, MD, 2015), pp. 149-70, p. 154; Ogola, ‘Citizen journalism’, p. 233.

<sup>34</sup> *The Star*, ‘Kenyans 4th most active Twitter users in Africa, politics among hot topics’, 6 April 2016, <[http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/04/06/kenyans-4th-most-active-twitter-users-in-africa-politics-among-hot\\_c1326926](http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/04/06/kenyans-4th-most-active-twitter-users-in-africa-politics-among-hot_c1326926)> (27 July 2016).

<sup>35</sup> Bloggers Association of Kenya, ‘State of the Internet in Kenya 2016 Report’ (Bloggers Association of Kenya, Nairobi, 2016), p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, ‘Lights, camera, *jihad*’, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Anzalone, ‘Continuity and change: The evolution and resilience of Al-Shabab’s media insurgency, 2006-2016’ (Hate Speech International, Oslo, 2016), p. 4.



Nchi.<sup>38</sup> The Kenyan military's public affairs campaign was further enhanced when selected journalists were embedded on operations in Somalia: 'journalists [embedded with the KDF] were not stopped or restricted from using social media – it was all systems go,' describes one reporter who accompanied troops in the Kenya-Somalia borderland.<sup>39</sup> The effect of the information flow on social media, a defence correspondent notes, is that journalists' reports helped their audiences to identify with the troops deployed against Al Shabaab in Somalia and sowed a sense of patriotism among the Kenyan public.<sup>40</sup>

Awareness of the KDF's conflict in Somalia shot up in September 2013 when Al Shabaab made international headlines with its assault on Nairobi's Westgate shopping mall. The world watched on as 67 civilians were killed in a four-day long assault. The attackers' use of social media during the assault led to them being dubbed 'Twitter terrorists',<sup>41</sup> and helped ensure that Al Shabaab became infamous for more than just the brutality of its actions on the ground. Not only was Westgate the first time that a terrorist group used Twitter to claim responsibility for an attack, but it also cemented for Al Shabaab the dubious reputation of having carried out the earliest incidence of 'real-time, direct-to-target-audience propaganda' live-tweeting by a terrorist organization during an on-going operation.<sup>42</sup> Analysis of social media use by state actors during the assault on Westgate identifies a lack of coordination over when, how and what could be made public, and also reveals that security breaches within emergency organizations led to the relay of sensitive information on Twitter.<sup>43</sup>

Any discussion of social media during and after the Westgate, El Adde and Kulbiyow attacks should not conceal significant differences in the contexts of the incidents and the official responses. While for many Kenyan civilians the 'war on Al Shabaab' falls under the umbrella of 'security' irrespective of whether the location is home or abroad, the El Adde and Kulbiyow attacks that this article focuses on are distinct from Westgate in that neither was a terrorist attack in the usual sense, but were combat during war.<sup>44</sup> Both the El Adde and Kulbiyow attacks targeted a military installation within the KDF's Somalia theatre of operations. The responses to the Somalia-based attacks were therefore entirely a military affair, differentiating

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<sup>38</sup> Interview, journalist, Nairobi, 23 February 2016. (Interviews or focus groups conducted in Mombasa are indicated as such; no given location denotes Nairobi.); *Telegraph*, 'Tweeting terrorism: How al Shabaab live blogged the Nairobi attacks', 22 September 2013, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/kenya/10326863/Tweeting-terrorism-How-al-Shabaab-live-blogged-the-Nairobi-attacks.html>> (28 September 2016); Jamal Osman, 'Al-Shabaab: Using social media to fight the *jihād*', 25 October 2013, <<http://www.channel4.com/news/al-shabaab-jihadist-kenya-westgate-kenya-nairobi-twitter>> (24 September 2016).

<sup>39</sup> Personal communication, journalist, 19 August 2016.

<sup>40</sup> Interview, journalist, 23 February 2016.

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Mail*, 'The Twitter terrorists: How killers boasted of Kenyan mall carnage with live commentary as they murdered dozens of people', 23 September 2013, <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2429660/Kenya-attack-How-killers-boasted-Nairobi-Westgate-shopping-mall-carnage-Twitter.html>> (17 October 2016).

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Weimann, 'New terrorism and new media' (Commons Lab of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, DC, 2014), p. 8; Stewart Bertram and Keith Ellison, 'Sub Saharan African terrorist groups' use of the internet', *Journal of Terrorism Research* 5, 1 (2014), pp. 5-26, p. 20.

<sup>43</sup> Simon, 'Twitter in the cross fire', pp. 1, 4 and 9.

<sup>44</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source B. This view approximately follows David Omand, *Securing the state* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014), p. 90, and the argument of an enmeshing of internal and external threats given in Lind, 'Killing'.

them from the Westgate debacle, which involved a host of responders and domestic security actors.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to Westgate, the KDF/Ministry of Defence's (MoD) official comments on social media or any other channels were therefore guided by different bureaucratic, legislative and institutional protocols that apply to their mission in Somalia. Despite the similar nature of Al Shabaab's attacks on El Adde and Kulbiyow, the KDF's social media response to the two incidents was markedly different.

### *El Adde: a communication vacuum*

For all the KDF's proclamation about the Kenyan public's right to know about its activities, the official message on social media was light on details during and after the El Adde attack. This follows the position of those who argue that any loss of control over how one's image is perceived is deemed to be a significant threat to security.<sup>46</sup> However, as a brief summary of communication on social media at the time of the attack shows, too little official information can also generate controversy.<sup>47</sup> One of the first to report the attack was the @modern corps (now @patrickssafariR) Twitter account, run by Patrick Safari, a prison officer at the time. Prior to using his personal name for his Twitter/Facebook accounts, Mr Safari ran an anonymous account that shared security information and what appeared to be classified 'leaks' from various police, prison, military and state arms. @modern corps was frequently first to break many stories:

BREAKING: #AlShabaab militants attack a KDF base in EL-Adde, somalia early morning. Fatalities reported. So far No word from Kenyan Govt.<sup>48</sup>

AMISOM confirmed the incident,<sup>49</sup> as did the MoD with the following release:

Today, 15<sup>th</sup> January 2016 at 4.00am, Al Shabaab militia attacked the Somali National Army (SNA) camp which is in close proximity to Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) camp at Elade in Somalia. The SNA camp was overrun and the KDF troops under AMISOM counter-attacked in support of SNA. The fighting was still on-going by the time of this release and the number of casualties on both sides is unknown. KDF will provide more information on the incident once it becomes available.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Simon, 'Twitter in the cross fire', p. 4, Table 2.

<sup>46</sup> Elgin Brunner and Myriam Cavelty, 'The formation of information by the US military: Articulation and enactment of infomantic threat imaginaries on the immaterial battlefield of perception', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, 4 (2009), pp. 629-46, p. 635.

<sup>47</sup> This section draws on SMS: Africa Kenya internal report 1, January 2016.

<sup>48</sup> @modern corps, 14 January 2016, 23:49hrs, <<https://twitter.com/moderncorps/status/687904503354507264>> (15 January 2016).

<sup>49</sup> @amisomsomalia, 14 January 2016, 23:57hrs, <<https://twitter.com/amisomsomalia/status/687906390225084416>> (15 January 2016).

<sup>50</sup> @IskenyaIsMe, 14 January 2016, 23:51hrs, <<https://twitter.com/IskenyaIsMe/status/687905006092206080>> (15 January 2016). The tweet appears to have been sent prior to the attack, suggesting the author's device may have been set to a different time zone.

This confirmation from the MoD came not from any official military social media account, but in the form of a hardcopy press release. It was left for others to take a photograph of the release and to share it online. Meanwhile, in the absence of any alternative official online counter-narrative from the MoD or government, the militants were able to drive the narrative.<sup>51</sup> There were those on social media who were aware of the possibility of propaganda from the militants, and were wary of repeating the information coming out of Somalia at the time. In response, the multi-agency NCTC attempted to present a case for why Al Shabaab's reports should be snubbed:

We urge all Kenyans & people of goodwill to stand with @amisomsomalia & #KDF by refusing to be conduits for terrorist propaganda @InteriorKE.<sup>52</sup>

The hashtag #IStandWithKDF began to trend in solidarity with Kenya's army, but little more official detail was provided by the KDF. Tweeting under the @CTNSIS (Counter Terrorism & National Security Intelligence Services) acronym, Strategic Intelligence Service (SIS), a Tel Aviv-based security information organization,<sup>53</sup> quickly offered insight into how communications might be used to influence the narrative:

@HarunMaruf The objective of raising figures is to counter possibility of high losses on their side. It's psychological/Information warfare.<sup>54</sup>

SIS also offered news of the KDF's retaliatory action:<sup>55</sup>

Expect No Mercy in El-Adde, Somalia, we will give glory, valor and victory to our Motherland! KDF Soldiers vow.<sup>56</sup>

Some Kenyans used social media to express their suspicion that such news of retaliation was merely pro-government propaganda, and suggested that the official updates were not as comprehensive as they wanted them to be. With no further information from official sources, and nothing on KDF casualties, Martha Karua, a high-profile politician with over 700,000 followers on Twitter, later pointed to 'the dilemma' of security-related news in the public domain, and insisted that

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<sup>51</sup> This point is also made by Peter Pham, Director, Atlantic Council's Africa Center, in *CNN*, 'Kenya covers up military massacre', 31 May 2016, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2016/05/31/africa/kenya-soldiers-el-adde-massacre/>> (between 02:14 and 02:32) (13 July 2016).

<sup>52</sup> @NCTC\_Kenya, 16 January 2016, 02:24hrs, <[https://twitter.com/NCTC\\_Kenya/status/688305702255882245](https://twitter.com/NCTC_Kenya/status/688305702255882245)> (16 January 2016).

<sup>53</sup> @CTNSIS, 2016, Counter Terrorism & National Security Intelligence homepage (Twitter), <<https://twitter.com/CTNSIS>> (21 November 2016).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 16 January 2016, 04:37hrs, <<https://twitter.com/CTNSIS/status/688339143856926720>> (16 January 2016).

<sup>55</sup> For a counter to Kenyan media versions of the aftermath, see 'Amisom struggles', *Africa Confidential* 57, 5 (2016), pp. 9-10.

<sup>56</sup> @CTNSIS, 15 January 2016, 06:00hrs, <<https://twitter.com/CTNSIS/status/687997802048274433>> (15 January 2016).

[...] citizens need information and have a right to know!<sup>57</sup>

In urging the Kenya security forces to provide some facts on the attack, Karua acknowledged the enemy's ability to influence the narrative:

[...] releasing info will insulate citizens from propaganda.<sup>58</sup>

The assessment that releasing the casualty information would have been damaging to the KDF's reputation, and therefore of propaganda value to the enemy, likely helps account for the refusal to offer any official comment.<sup>59</sup> It is an indicator of Kenyan officials' understanding of security information on social media as a data/commodity that is to be guarded.<sup>60</sup> It is also contrary to the official line taken during Operation Linda Nchi, that the KDF had to go out of its way to avail information to the public, 'operational security considerations notwithstanding'.<sup>61</sup> Instead, through its reticence during and in the immediate aftermath of the deadly attack, the KDF was making clear its position on the flow of information concerning this particular threat to national security: the *need-to-know* was paramount. The lives lost were acknowledged later through articles in the media covering the arrival of the fallen being greeted in Nairobi with military honours, and in posts that promised reprisal; but the requests for details on casualties was never satisfied.<sup>62</sup> The *right-to-know*, so often a demand of Kenyans on Twitter, was sidelined, and any information that was to be released to civilians was strongly regulated.

#### *Kulbiyow: regular operational updates*

On 27 January 2017 Al Shabaab conducted another attack on an AMISOM base garrisoned by KDF troops, this time at Kulbiyow, Lower Juba, Somalia.<sup>63</sup> The assault closely resembled that on El Adde almost exactly a year before, with the initial launch of a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device at the camp gates that allowed fighters to attack en masse.<sup>64</sup> The difference this time was an apparent sea-change in KDF's attitude towards informing the

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<sup>57</sup> @MarthaKarua, 17 January 2016, 02:12hrs, <<https://twitter.com/MarthaKarua/status/688665238393204737>> (17 January 2016).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 02:13hrs, <<https://twitter.com/MarthaKarua/status/688665517016637440>> (16 December 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source B. This point is made more generally in Paul Williams, 'How many fatalities has the African Union Mission in Somalia suffered?', 10 September 2015, <<https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/09/amisom-african-union-somalia-peacekeeping/>> (3 February 2017).

<sup>60</sup> Brunner, 'The formation of information', p. 630.

<sup>61</sup> Migue, *Operation*, p. 152.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Nation*, 'Solemn mass for fallen KDF soldiers at airport as bodies arrive', 20 January 2016, <<http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Solemn-mass-at-airport-as-bodies-arrive/1056-3040568-hbicko/index.html>> (3 January 2017); *The Star*, 'Government silence on El Adde is a scandal', 30 September 2016, <[http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/09/30/government-silence-on-el-adde-is-a-scandal\\_c1429256](http://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2016/09/30/government-silence-on-el-adde-is-a-scandal_c1429256)> (3 January 2017).

<sup>63</sup> This section draws on SMS: Africa Kenya internal report 2, January 2017.

<sup>64</sup> 'Another Kenya army base hit', *Africa Confidential* 58, 3 (2017), p. 12; United Nations, 'Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea submitted in accordance with resolution 2317', (New York, November 2017), pp. 54-55.

public. In stark contrast to their communications response to El Adde, for Kulbiyow the KDF supplied their Twitter followers with a series of briefs tagged as ‘#OpsUpdate’. With frequent use of ‘our’, ‘brave’ and ‘soldiers’, the KDF’s content was as much aimed at uniting the audience around Kenyan troops as it was an actual update on the KDF response to the attack.<sup>65</sup> Crucially, this time a reminder was quickly made about the dangers of Al Shabaab’s social media warfare machine:

#OpsUpdate 4. It is important to note that contrary to information peddled by the terrorists, our camp has not been overran [sic]. #KDFKulbiyow #KDF.<sup>66</sup>

Minutes later the KDF again emphasized to its followers the need to be aware of the enemy’s methods in cyberspace, as stated in one of the opening statements of the MoD’s first press release:

It is important to note that the information being peddled by terrorists on social media is false and part of their propaganda.<sup>67</sup>

The updates on social media were met with familiar claims from Kenyans (and others) on Twitter about the accuracy and depth of KDF’s information, as well as some comments about trust and accountability. The most striking difference between the KDF’s communications response to El Adde and Kulbiyow, however, is that with this latest attack the KDF supplied their version of events before a swell of complaints about silence or any accusations of a cover-up could gain traction. Alongside their OpsUpdates, the KDF also issued a series of official press releases from the MoD, still in letter form as protocol requires, but this time posted directly on their own @kdinfo feed. The releases offered more information on the timeline of events and some detail on casualties. What follows are three plausible explanations as to why the KDF did not offer real-time updates about the El Adde attack, but did provide information from Kulbiyow one year later.

### *Learning from (in)experience*

The first explanation concerns KDF’s experience in disseminating real-time information. By the time of the KDF’s entry into Somalia, its personnel had served on, and in some cases provided top leadership for, close to 50 Peace Support Operations around the world.<sup>68</sup> Despite this experience however, at the time of the attack on El Adde the KDF had never really been tested in an environment where it was operational lead and the enemy was giving real-time updates. This was evident in the official communication response to El Adde, which came after

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<sup>65</sup> For example, @kdinfo, 27 January 2017, 12:23hrs, <<https://twitter.com/kdinfo/status/824895680049143808>> (27 January 2017). See also updates 1, 3 and 5.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:29hrs, <<https://twitter.com/kdinfo/status/824896980094627840>> (27 January 2017).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 12:38hrs, <<https://twitter.com/kdinfo/status/824899261938556928>>.

<sup>68</sup> Migue, *Operation*, pp. 76-77.

other sources broke the news on social media, and only then in hardcopy press release that others photographed and shared.

The task of creating and pushing the message has long been the job of official press offices but, as the El Adde case shows, it is especially difficult to counter when the message is supplied by terrorist groups such as Al Shabaab that often operate in smaller, more nimble networks with flatter command-and-control structures.<sup>69</sup> As Neville Bolt describes the situation, 'state bureaucracies with their junctions of decision-making face the fog of incoming information' while still trying to dominate the story agenda.<sup>70</sup> Whatever form the official communication on social media takes, a photographed letter or a more direct tweet, the reality for a conventional military force is that the response is still subject to institutional processes and protocols that govern how incoming information is analyzed and responded to before the message is disseminated to the public.<sup>71</sup> As the KDF itself acknowledges in relation to social media,

the inherent slow pace of [the] bureaucratic system means that more often than not hostile or extremist elements are better positioned to take advantage of the opportunities offered. It is important to reckon here that Al Shabaab is very good at making such capital.<sup>72</sup>

#### *Adopting from the enemy: information drives the narrative*

Al Shabaab's dissemination of real-time information provides the second explanation. El Adde seemed to teach the KDF that in order not to lose the all-important public opinion, it has to match its enemy and also disseminate credible information to the public. Granted, the limited official response to demands on social media for information relating to El Adde helped the KDF avoid mistakes similar to those levelled at a plethora of emergency and security organizations for their use of Twitter during Al Shabaab's assault on Westgate. During the mall attack, the abundance of Twitter accounts providing 'official' updates made it difficult to synchronize and follow the flow of information.<sup>73</sup> But limited official information created a new problem, since the substitution of multiple messages (at Westgate) with a communication vacuum (at El Adde) generated suspicion of silence in a social media environment where rumours spread rapidly. With no official counter-narrative, the Kenyan public were in the somewhat absurd position of perhaps trusting the adversary's account more than that of their own military.<sup>74</sup> Aided by a history of relaying information in what Al Shabaab likes to call 'media warfare,' the enemy were able to drive the narrative.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Marc Sageman, *Leaderless jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2008).

<sup>70</sup> Neville Bolt, *The violent image: Insurgent propaganda and the new revolutionaries* (Hurst, London, 2012), p. 190.

<sup>71</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source B.

<sup>72</sup> Migue, *Operation*, p. 154.

<sup>73</sup> Simon, 'Twitter in the cross fire', p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source B.

<sup>75</sup> Al Shabaab communiqué, 27 August 2010, cited in Anzalone, 'Continuity and change', p. 30.



The situation suited Al Shabaab for more than the short-term gain of its El Adde reports being believed. As reflected in their online content, the organization clearly places much value on information about victories over their enemies.<sup>76</sup> Yet if victory was the most important aspect of Al Shabaab's media warfare, then the terrorist group would be tempted to claim success even in non-existent battles. Al Shabaab makes no such claims because they realize the importance for them to be perceived as *the* trustworthy source about all their activities. Propaganda may serve recruitment,<sup>77</sup> but not influence warfare, where credibility is crucial.<sup>78</sup> A Nairobi resident likened the government not telling the Kenyan public about the El Adde deaths to an abusive partner who is having an affair:

It is like we are in a relationship where the person is cheating on you. You actually see them cheating ... and they tell you that they are [hiding the affair] to protect you – because they love you.<sup>79</sup>

In the same vein, another focus group participant was suspicious of the lack of an official response on social media:

I am always wary of silence, especially when it comes to death. It removes the humanity of it – it makes it as if they are disposable. To me this whole issue [of so little official communication about El Adde] has really affected my trust in the government.<sup>80</sup>

This case shows that when an inquisitive public is not supplied with information from official sources that it can believe, the response is to believe what is available even if it is from the enemy. A Mombasa resident expressed as much, with specific reference to the El Adde attack: 'we didn't get the truth [about the fact that] so many soldiers died. The government lied to us. Social media helps find the truth'.<sup>81</sup> Al Shabaab's dissemination of real-time information has fundamentally changed what 'need-to-know' means in the eyes of the KDF: since public opinion is essential, the public *do* need to know.

### *Fighting on the other front: Kenya's third space*

Third, the strengthening voice of Kenyan citizens, amplified by social media, and the potential for further reputational damage could have pushed the KDF from a 'need-to-know' frame of mind in terms of its sharing of information, to more of a 'right-to-know' mentality. While

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<sup>76</sup> Meleagrou-Hitchens, 'Lights, camera, *jihad*', p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> Anzalone, 'The resilience of al-Shabaab', pp. 13-20; Paul Joosse, Sandra Bucerius and Sara Thompson, 'Narratives and counternarratives: Somali-Canadians on recruitment as foreign fighters to Al-Shabaab', *British Journal of Criminology* 55, 5 (2015), pp. 811-32, pp. 818-20; Meleagrou-Hitchens, 'Lights, camera, *jihad*', pp. 29-39.

<sup>78</sup> James Forest, 'Perception challenges faced by Al-Qaeda on the battlefield of influence warfare', *Perspectives on Terrorism* 6, 1 (2012), pp. 8-22, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> Professionals, 1 March 2016.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Non-university youth, Mombasa, 16 February 2016.

Martha Karua's insistence on citizens' right to know about El Adde as it unfolded may well have had an element of political motivation, it did seem to reflect the opinion held among a significant number of focus group participants after the attack. Echoing the KDF's initial emphasis on taxation conferring the right to know, Nairobi-based youth in particular commonly expressed their right to know about the military's activities in Somalia in terms of their personal contribution to public expenditure.<sup>82</sup> These opinions were rarely expressed online by the university students and non-students. Reasons that social media users may decide not to engage on some open platforms include fear of victimisation or condemnation,<sup>83</sup> and suspicion and distrust of security and intelligence services<sup>84</sup> – this despite the assertion that there is usually less fear of possible intimidation or even prosecution by those who participate in online as opposed to offline discussions.<sup>85</sup> The views expressed in person came with varying degrees of sympathy for the KDF, from 'it is what we are paying them to do, they should do their job'<sup>86</sup> to 'I am a citizen and I pay taxes; I should be able to know.'<sup>87</sup> A prominent Kenyan blogger with close to one million followers on Twitter was of a similar opinion when commenting on information relating to the El Adde attack, remarking that 'troops are in Somalia through taxpayer money – we have the right to know.'<sup>88</sup>

To be sure, the majority of focus group participants recognize that the KDF's muted social media response to the El Adde attack was cognizant of the need to avoid sharing any information that may have handed further advantage to the perpetrators.<sup>89</sup> Focus group participants acknowledged that they did not really expect government agencies to offer sensitive security-related information, but they wanted something nevertheless.<sup>90</sup>

### *The official line*

Objectivity, neutrality and reliability aside,<sup>91</sup> the official account of Operation Linda Nchi makes frequent reference to the KDF's need to engage with the public for success in the campaign, and recognises the important role of social media as a tool for the military to connect with 'the citizens of the Republic of Kenya ... as taxpayers'.<sup>92</sup> In demonstrating its awareness of the need to be accountable to the taxpayer, the KDF explains that

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<sup>82</sup> Students, 29 February 2016; non-university youth, *ibid.*; students, 1 March 2016; non-university youth, 3 March 2016.

<sup>83</sup> Nyambura Salome, 'Has Kenya's ICT revolution triggered more citizen participation?' (IDS, Brighton, 2016), p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Caitriona Dowd, 'Using digital and social media to monitor and reduce violence in Kenya's elections' (Policy Briefing 144, IDS, Brighton, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>85</sup> George Ogola, 'Social media as a heteroglossic discursive space and Kenya's emergent alternative/citizen experiment', *African Journalism Studies* 36, 4 (2015), pp. 66-81, p. 75.

<sup>86</sup> Non-university youth, 3 March 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Students, 29 February 2016.

<sup>88</sup> Blogger, 21 February 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source B.

<sup>90</sup> Non-university youth, Mombasa, 15 February 2016 AM; *ibid.*, 29 February 2016; students, 29 February 2016; *Ibid.*, 1 March 2016; professionals, *ibid.*; non-university youth, 3 March 2016.

<sup>91</sup> See Olsen, 'October 2011', pp. 42-43.

<sup>92</sup> Migue, *Operation*, pp. 155-156.

the campaign against Al Shabaab took place at a time when the country enjoyed increased democratic space due to the promulgation of a new constitution that advocated for increased public voice on government policies. It also happened in an era which witnessed unparalleled access to information.<sup>93</sup>

In other words, the KDF acknowledges the growing influence of civil society in calling to account government institutions such as the military.

The KDF also recognizes that public opinion towards it is not always favourable: ‘prior to the incursion into Somalia the military’s image had been falsified’, reads the official account of Operation Linda Nchi, which cites claims dating from 2008 of military involvement in human rights violations (including rape, torture and the killing of innocent civilians) during counter-insurgency operations in the Mount Elgon area, and persistent allegations concerning corruption in recruitment exercises and procurement processes.<sup>94</sup> It was for these reasons, acknowledges the military, along with the perception they were an ‘untested’, ‘ceremonial army’, that ‘the public lacked trust in the KDF’.<sup>95</sup> This candid reflection suggests that the KDF is also well aware of the potential damage of more recent revelations that have come to light since Operation Linda Nchi. At Westgate, for example, the Kenyan public witnessed ‘the seeming incompetence of their security forces’,<sup>96</sup> and later watched video footage of soldiers looting from the mall during the terrorist attack.<sup>97</sup> The recordings of soldiers helping themselves to expensive phones and other items after they had shelled the terrorists’ hideout led London-based *The Guardian* newspaper to conclude that ‘the nation’s most trusted institution’ now has ‘a serious credibility problem’.<sup>98</sup> The KDF also faces strong allegations of being implicated in the illicit export of charcoal from Kismayo port in southern Somalia, and in the trade in contraband sugar from Somalia into Kenya.<sup>99</sup> In direct contravention of United Nations sanctions against terrorist financing, the KDF is reportedly involved in the racket with none other than Al Shabaab, with the battlefield adversaries together running ‘an economy that thrives on insecurity.... a textbook definition of a conflict economy in that war is more profitable (for a select and powerful few) than peace’.<sup>100</sup> A recent report by the UN Monitoring Group on Somalia accuses AMISOM’s KDF contingent of being particularly poor in the implementation of an agreement to stop the illegal trade, and concludes that the ‘conspicuously

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76, p. 152.

<sup>96</sup> Anderson, ‘Kenya at War’, p. 17.

<sup>97</sup> *Daily Nation*, ‘Two KDF soldiers sacked over Westgate looting’, 29 October 2013, <<http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Two-KDF-soldiers-sacked-over-Westgate-looting/1056-2051746-scuskpz/index.html>> (6 October 2017).

<sup>98</sup> *Guardian*, ‘Westgate: Kenya’s vibrant media exposed the army’s botched response’, 3 November 2013, <[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/03/terrorism-westgate-mall-press-freedom?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/03/terrorism-westgate-mall-press-freedom?CMP=share_btn_link)> (6 October 2017).

<sup>99</sup> Jeremy Lind, Patrick Mutahi and Marjoke Oosterom, ‘Tangled Ties: Al-Shabaab and Political Volatility in Kenya’ (Brighton, Institute of Development Studies, 2015) pp. 16-25; Anderson, ‘Kenya at War’, pp. 8-11.

<sup>100</sup> Ben Rawlence, ‘Black and white: Kenya’s criminal racket in Somalia’ (Journalists for Justice, Nairobi, 2015), p. 6.

deliberate failure to comply with the charcoal ban, enables Al-Shabaab financing and undermines counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency efforts in Somalia'.<sup>101</sup>

Acutely aware of the potential for public opinion to buckle under the accumulative weight of this bad press, the KDF now appears to engage with the 'right-to-know' mentality that provides real-time information to Kenyans on social media. More precisely, the KDF are aware of the influence of 'Kenyans on Twitter', a formidable yet amorphous collection of generally young, urban Kenyans who engage in activist-like behaviour online.<sup>102</sup> 'KoT,' as they are commonly referred to, are powerful inhabitants of Kenya's social media landscape, live-in landlords for what George Ogola and Mike Owuor term the country's "'third space" – a space neither "owned" by the state nor mainstream media but potentially powerful enough to be contested'.<sup>103</sup> KoT participation is open to all and non-hierarchical in principle, notes Ogola, but 'its conversations are generally initiated and/or popularised by a few well-known bloggers and activists ... who have become the community's "primary definers"'<sup>104</sup> – or, as Nendo terms them, KoT's 'bigwigs'.<sup>105</sup> Ogola identifies the primary definers as Ory Okolloh, Robert Alai, Cyprian Nyakundi, Abraham Mutai and Boniface Mwangi, members of an online community that he describes as 'interpellated by its general focus on mainly "alternative" narratives'.<sup>106</sup> Where political, the alternative narrative is often anti-government and guided by key influencers with a near celebrity status, some of whom are considered to be broadly sympathetic to the National Super Alliance (NASA) coalition, Kenya's main opposition to President Uhuru Kenyatta's ruling Jubilee Party.<sup>107</sup> At best, describes one informant, KoT's key influencers are 'representative of a doctrinaire, liberal ideal that seeks "transparency" in any circumstances involving the state and its organs'.<sup>108</sup> At worst, concludes the same informant, KoT's key influencers 'have a pro-NASA agenda, .... constantly seek to lambaste what they regard as monolithic institutions' and are clear 'proponents of the "right-to-know" about security-related information'.<sup>109</sup>

In the security context, KoT are 'very influential,' as a mid-grade police officer put it,<sup>110</sup> such that they 'can force government to do things by keeping issues trending'.<sup>111</sup> 'Nobody wants to be on the negative side of KoT', explains Duncan Ondimu, Special Prosecutor at the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (ODPP): 'The easiest way to lose your job is through being

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<sup>101</sup> United Nations, 'Report of the Monitoring Group' (November 2017), p. 46.

<sup>102</sup> Mark Kaigwa, 'From cyber to smartphone: Kenya's social media's lens zooms in on the country and out to the world', in Bitange Ndemo and Tim Weiss (eds), *Digital Kenya: The new generation of entrepreneurs* (Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2016), pp. 187-217, pp. 193-208.

<sup>103</sup> Ogola, 'Citizen journalism', pp. 229-243.

<sup>104</sup> Ogola, 'Social media', p. 74.

<sup>105</sup> Nendo, 'A-to-Z of Kenyan Twitter: B is for #Bigwig', 6 October 2014, <<http://atoztwitter.nendo.co.ke/b-is-for-bigwig-2/>> (17 February 2018).

<sup>106</sup> Ogola, 'Social media', p. 67.

<sup>107</sup> Personal communication, journalist, 22 July 2017; *Star*, 'Uhuru, Raila teams take campaign wars online', 6 June 2017, <[https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017/06/06/uhuru-raila-teams-take-campaign-wars-online\\_c1574589](https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2017/06/06/uhuru-raila-teams-take-campaign-wars-online_c1574589)> (17 December 2017).

<sup>108</sup> Personal communication, consultant, 28 December 2016.

<sup>109</sup> Personal communication, consultant, 28 December 2016.

<sup>110</sup> Mid-grade police officer, 3 March 2016.

<sup>111</sup> Security analyst, 9 February 2016.

called out on social media for violations or corruption'.<sup>112</sup> KoT are 'really powerful – I can say *really* powerful,' emphasizes a senior police officer,<sup>113</sup> and they are known to have influenced the Kenya National Police Service (NPS) 'to a great extent .... [in investigations into alleged] extrajudicial killings and police abuses: many of these have been exposed through social media, often with videos. It has brought a sense of fear to us. [KoT] create an uproar and often something comes of it'.<sup>114</sup>

Maggie Dwyer's study of the NPS's digital strategy shows how the organization is now attempting to use social media to enhance accountability and trust in the police, who have long experienced strained relations with a civilian population and media that has consistently accused them of abusing their power.<sup>115</sup> When compared with the NPS, many Kenyan citizens have traditionally had a less hostile attitude towards the KDF,<sup>116</sup> in part because in much of the country there is less frequent interaction between civilians and military. This patriotism towards the nation's defenders was also reflected by KoT's complaints on social media that they were being denied information about casualties in El Adde. Nevertheless, there is now a sense that the KDF is not exempt from the criticism that has traditionally been levelled at the NPS:

It won't be long before [KoT] have [the KDF] in their sights. It's just a matter of time.... Nobody will tell you a police officer is corrupt and making deals, and the KDF are not. When KoT find this out they'll start a war [online], and with KDF all hell will break loose. All it will take is one more furore like when [the KDF] didn't tell about the casualties from Al Shabaab [at El Adde], and KoT will do their thing, kick up a huge fuss on Twitter .... The KDF also feels the pressure from social media. Nobody is safe nowadays.<sup>117</sup>

### *Controlling the narrative*

One response to criticism of security agencies has been alleged attempts by the Presidential Strategic Communication Unit (PSCU) to set the agenda on social media through what Ogola and Owuor describe as 'covert operations' on social media.<sup>118</sup> They give the example of a debate on the popular *Press Pass* television show in 2014 when mention was made of the opposition's position that KDF troops should be withdrawn from Somalia.<sup>119</sup> In the ensuing online battle for control of the narrative on how best to respond to Al Shabaab, Ogola and

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<sup>112</sup> Ondimu, 21 February 2016.

<sup>113</sup> Senior police officer, 24 February 2016.

<sup>114</sup> Mid-grade police officer, 3 March 2016.

<sup>115</sup> Maggie Dwyer, 'Reimagining police engagement? Kenya National Police Service on social media', SMS: Africa Kenya working paper, July 2018.

<sup>116</sup> *Guardian*, 'Westgate: Kenya's vibrant media exposed the army's botched response', 3 November 2013, <[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/03/terrorism-westgate-mall-press-freedom?CMP=share\\_btn\\_link](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/03/terrorism-westgate-mall-press-freedom?CMP=share_btn_link)> (6 October 2017).

<sup>117</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source C.

<sup>118</sup> This section draws on Ogola, 'Citizen journalism', p. 240.

<sup>119</sup> *Xinhua*, 'Kenya's opposition vows to pull soldiers from Somalia', 28 June 2017, <[http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/28/c\\_136401807.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/28/c_136401807.htm)> (29 November 2017).

Owuor reveal the posting of numerous tweets in support of the government's argument, sent from multiple accounts at exactly the same time with identical wording – including, in one case, the same misspelling of the terrorist group in question: 'It is unacceptable that the opposition has the same stand as Alshababa. #presspass.' Such examples, the authors suggest, point to 'the possible use of bots or fake accounts to counter oppositional narratives', in concert with bloggers paid to tweet, comment on and re-tweet messages in support of government positions. It is also indicative of the politicisation of the war and the discussion around it.

There is no suggestion that the KDF is involved in the use of bots or fake accounts. But there is a chance that the KDF's narratives of Al Shabaab's attacks will be undermined by independent research by those who take neither a pro-government nor a pro-Shabaab stance in their investigations. For example, analysis conducted by the Johannesburg-based African Defence Review, an independent media company, into competing claims about the Kulbiyow attack seems to validate aspects of Al Shabaab claim's, reported by some local media and supposedly corroborated by witnesses, that the base was overrun, the KDF suffered heavy casualties, and vehicles were destroyed and equipment looted.<sup>120</sup> Such investigations take weeks if not months to materialize and so do not directly influence the real-time narrative. But by providing detailed evidence-based arguments that clearly question the veracity of the KDF's blanket denials, the investigations do contribute to the accumulative weight of bad press about the Kenyan military, which the citizens they are mandated to protect and serve may encounter on social media. This only provides the enemy with yet further propaganda. As Jacob Beeders puts it at the end of his analysis into the KDF's response to Kulbiyow:

The continued obfuscation on details regarding major al-Shabaab attacks by the Kenyan government allows al-Shabaab to seize the narrative of events. Additionally, it stifles attempts at accountability that could potentially mitigate future risks to Kenyan soldiers. The Kenyan government's refusal to acknowledge publicly the large numbers of soldiers killed, or tactical shortfalls in major battles, precludes their willingness for investigations and accountability.<sup>121</sup>

## *Conclusion*

El Adde was a significant flashpoint at which citizens clashed with the state over what information could be shared, and with whom. The case of El Adde shows that while social media gives publics a sense of power, there are situations in which this has its limits: institutions such as the KDF can simply refuse to give information to those they deem have no need to it. But when Al Shabaab struck at Kulbiyow, the KDF quickly supplied Kenyan citizens with a measure of what they had asked for from El Adde: reportage on events, and some information on casualties. In the age of social media warfare, the dissemination of such

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<sup>120</sup> Conway Waddington, 'The Kulbiyow attack uncovered', 22 March 2017, <<https://www.africandefence.net/analysis-of-competing-claims-about-the-january-2017-al-shabaab-attack-on-the-kdf-base-at-kulbiyow/>> (25 November 2017).

<sup>121</sup> Jacob Beeders, 'What happened in Kulbiyow, Somalia: an open source investigation', 21 March 2017, <<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/africa/2017/03/21/happened-kulbiyow-somalia-open-source-investigation/>> (25 November 2017).



information is now essential in seeking to influence a growing, demanding and frequently vociferous audience that claims its right to know the official account of battles being fought using taxpayers' money. This desire for information also reflects the relationship that publics now expect to have with public institutions.

It would be incorrect to conclude that, whether intentional or not, KoT alone has managed to push the KDF from a 'need-to-know' policy to a 'right-to-know' policy. The KDF has kept to its stated core values of remaining apolitical and in subordinating itself to democratic civil authority, operating under a strict chain of command from the Chief of the Defence Forces, who is Principal Military Advisor to President Kenyatta, the Commander-in-Chief.<sup>122</sup> Given this structure, it would be fanciful to believe that the KDF then privileges a loosely-knit and largely invisible collection of online activists who frequently point out failings of the state.<sup>123</sup> This is not to suggest that the KDF ignores public opinion; far from it. As well as following the views of online commentary, the KDF and other arms of the state security apparatus also have an ear for public opinion as expressed in person.<sup>124</sup> This article has taken a similar approach, applying more traditional offline methods of qualitative data collection to understand Kenyans' online 'voice' with respect to the actions of its military. It has offered deeper insight into, and the necessary context of, views expressed – and not expressed – on social media. The focus groups with university students and non-students, for example, reveal that many Nairobi-based youth did have a keen interest in the KDF's progress at El Adde. Part of their motivation to follow reports of the attack on social media was because, as taxpayers, they had concerns over the fiscal accountability of the military, and they used a rhetorical technique that equated their payment of taxes with their right to know. Yet they rarely expressed this online.

A conclusion to be drawn here is that, for all the advantages that platforms such as Twitter hold as 'a lens to view connected Kenyans as a whole,'<sup>125</sup> the opinions of a loud and sometimes boistrous KoT are not necessarily representative of Kenyans on social media or the full spectrum of their opinions. Some prefer to post their thoughts in private groups on WhatsApp, Kenya's most active social media platform, or to remain completely silent online.<sup>126</sup> Methodologically, this article points to the importance for research on social media content to also consider the gains to be made by data that is collected offline. The analysis of the incidents covered here show that social media, and the debate that continues offline, helps to forge a new language of citizenship and entitlement that extends beyond this Kenya example.

Inspired by the idea of Ethiopia's 'quiet' technopolitics, this article has shown that social media platforms such as Twitter can be seen in contrast as sites of noisy contestation where security-related matters affecting Kenyans are played out in the open, often with a strong

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<sup>122</sup> MoD, 'Our core values', 2017, <<http://www.mod.go.ke/?p=2565>> (24 November 2017); *ibid.*, 'About MoD', <[http://www.mod.go.ke/?page\\_id=338](http://www.mod.go.ke/?page_id=338)>.

<sup>123</sup> Personal communication, Kenya security source B.

<sup>124</sup> Migue, *Operation*, pp. 74-94; Personal communication, Kenya security source C.

<sup>125</sup> Kaigwa, 'From cyber to smartphone', p. 208.

<sup>126</sup> We Are Social, 'Digital in 2018 in Eastern Africa', 29 January 2018, <<https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-eastern-africa-part-1-north-86865720>> (at slide 94 of 192) (17 February 2018).

political undercurrent, by ordinary citizens and powerful key influencers. As much as radio is an unlikely medium of comparison to the unregulated social media world of influencers and of fake accounts and bots, parallels can also be drawn with Nicole Stremlau's work on Somali call-in programmes where citizens discuss accountability and democratic participation. In the same way as the spontaneity and authenticity of the Somali call-in shows is constructed by clientelistic forces,<sup>127</sup> the 'third space' that is Kenya's social media, initially free of the government control and the mainstream media, is also finding that its narrative is increasingly influenced by invisible hired-hands.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Stremlau, 'Patronage, politics and performance', p. 1513.

<sup>128</sup> Ogola, 'Citizen journalism', p. 241-242.